

# Tragedy in the Modern Age: The Case of Arthur Miller

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**A**rthur Miller is one of the advocates of a modern conception of tragedy. His play *Death of a Salesman* had been rejected by some critics on the basis that it was not in conformity with the main tenets of the classical tragedy. In reaction to these critics, Miller wrote an essay entitled “The Tragedy of the Common Man” (1958) in which he defended his conception of tragedy. In the following paper, we shall attempt to highlight some aspects of Miller’s work in relation to his essay. To achieve this aim, we shall begin by defining what Aristotle’s conception of tragedy is, and then we shall trace briefly the development of the tragic genre from the antiquity to the present age. We shall put emphasis on the modern transformations and we shall discuss two of Arthur Miller’s works, namely *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*.

Aristotle defines tragedy as “a representation of an action that is serious” (2000: 64); that is to say a dramatic performance destined to a high class audience. Aristotle adds that through the arrangement of events, tragedy arouses fear and pity, and brings about the purgation of such emotions. Purgation is the English translation of the Greek word *Katharsis*. Aristotle made this concept the basic principle that determines the organisation of the tragic plot and the conception of the tragic hero.

In order to excite the **Kathartic** effect, Aristotle prescribes three unities: one, the unity of time; two the unity of place, three, the unity of plot. According to him, the time duration of the tragic plot should be limited to “one revolution of the sun” i.e. twenty-four hours, its spatial setting should be restricted to a single area, and its various incidents should be arranged so that “if anyone of them is differently placed or taken away, the effect of wholeness will be seriously disrupted” (ibid. 68). In other words, tragic plots, unlike epic ones, are never episodic.

According to Aristotle, the master tragic plot that can reach the **Kathartic** effect in its fullest sense is the complex plot that accompanies the hero’s change of fortune with a reversal and discovery. This master plot involves tragic heroes that are drawn from stories of “a few families”, above all the legends and the myths of Troyes and Thebes. Aristotle defines the tragic hero as follows:

“He is the sort of man who is not conspicuous for virtue and justice, and whose fall into misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather to some error, a man who enjoys prosperity and high reputation, like Oedipus and Thyestes, and other members of families like theirs” (ibid. 73).

We infer from the definition that the tragic hero in classical tragedies is a mythical figure who is neither too good nor too bad. His fall into wretchedness is made intelligible through an error (*hubris*) which is the consequence of a tragic flaw (*hamartia*). Thus, most protagonists in Greek tragedies possess

**hamartia** and **hubris**. They are very high standing people betrayed by their own weaknesses. Their decadence is called *nemesis*. Northrop Frye defines it as “the rightening of the balance”; the balance being “the order of nature” that the hero has disturbed.

Aristotle’s insights to the “art” of tragedy exerted a lasting influence on Western literature in general, and on the English one in particular. In the Middle Ages, Chaucer defined tragedy as follows:

Tragedy is to seyn a certyn story  
As olde bookes maken us memorie  
Of hym that stood in great prosperitee  
And is yfallen out of a high degree  
Into miserie, and endeth wretchedly  
(quoted in Burian P. 2001: 178)

As it can be noticed, this definition echoes strongly Aristotle’s rise and fall pattern and the stature of his heroes. The influence of these two levels of representation extended also to the Elizabethan tragedies which, though fundamentally derived from Seneca’s revenge tragedy (also called tragedy of blood), remained close to Aristotelian norms and dealt with people of high status, such as Kings and Princes, and described their fall. One instance is provided by Shakespeare’s *Othello* which fits strongly Aristotle’s concepts of the tragic hero and plot.

In the twentieth century, many aspects of the classical tragedy, as described by Aristotle, were questioned and dramatists broke away from the Greek canons. As we have already mentioned, Arthur Miller is among the fiercest modern exponents of a modern conception of tragedy. His play *Death of a Salesman* has been dismissed on the basis that its protagonist Willy Loman lacks the stature of a tragic hero.

Miller’s conception of tragedy retains only its catastrophic ending. It contends that “the last appeal of tragedy is due to our need to face the fact of death in order to strengthen ourselves for life, and that over and above this function of the tragic viewpoint, there are and will be a great number of **formal variation** (our emphasis) which no single definition will ever embrace.” (the allusion to Aristotle should not be mistaken here) (1983 :166).

The first Aristotelian protocol refuted by Miller in his essay is that which deals with the stature of the hero. Miller distinguishes between stature and rank and argues that if the Greek dramatists dealt solely with characters of high estate, it is because they were living in a hierarchical society. Relying heavily on this idea, Miller goes on to demote the traditional conventions of tragedy.

According to Miller, the common man can pretend to a tragic status and his story can provide materials for tragedy provided that his story engages issues of importance, such as the sense of personal dignity, the survival of the race, or the relationships of Man to God. According to us, this variation ought to be understood against Aristotle’s rise and fall pattern. For in modern societies where the political

systems are democratic, Kings and Princes no longer raise our passion, and the low man's misery and loss are as tearing as the fall of Kings was for the Greeks.

Besides his rejection of Aristotle's rise and fall model in favour of the thematic issue aroused by the dramatic performance, Miller questions the highbred position of the tragic heroes. Keeping in mind the distinction between stature and rank already stated, the American playwright argues that the common man can evoke tragic feelings on two conditions:

One: He should display an intensity of feeling and passion. This quality cannot be achieved if the protagonist's commitment to his course is not the maximum possible. In other words, the hero should be faithfully devoted to his quest and his involvement should be strong and vigorous

Two: The hero should be aware of his social condition and the implication of his choice. He may lack intellectual fluency to verbalise his situation or even a complete consciousness, but he should never be unaware of the ultimate questions that he sacrifices his life for.

As regards the tragic flaw, the modern tragic hero may or may not have a defect of character or *Hamartia*. Miller remarks that "the flaw, or crack in the character is really nothing – and need to be nothing, but his inherent willingness to remain passive in the face of what he conceives to be a challenge to his dignity, his image of his rightful status." He also adds that there are only the passive people, those who do not question their lot, who are "flawless".

What comes out from Miller's overall revision of the *Poetics* is that he has shifted Aristotle's focus on the form of tragedy to the content of tragedy; in other words, the American dramatist shifted the genre's interest from plot to theme. Besides, Miller has also overlooked Aristotle's concept of **Katharsis** and has drawn the portrait of the tragic hero from the lower classes rather than from the higher ones. The reason is that the common man is more representative of the modern societies than the highbred.

Miller's plays illustrate his modern conception of the tragic. In what follows, we try to analyse two of them, namely *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible* in order to show how modern tragedy, as defined by Miller, applies to them.

*Death of a Salesman* (1949) is Miller's most successful play. It relates the story of Willy Loman, a salesman in his early sixties, who dreams to become a successful businessman and to be "well liked by people". But Willy's dream is an illusion, and his precarious social and economic condition is compounded by his entanglement with his own son Biff. At the end of the play, Willy realises that he can never fulfil his dream. But when he receives insurance that Biff loves him, Willy commits suicide so that his family would benefit from the insurance money.

The portrait of Willy Loman is at odds with that of his classical counterparts. His very name suggests his humble origin (low man). But in spite of his low social status, Willy succeeds to impress the

reader. The reason is that even though he fails to materialise his dreams of respectability and success, he still keeps his dignity. For in the play, Miller is careful to stress his character's struggle to retain his dignity as much as he engages the issues of material success and popular esteem.

Willy Loman's struggle to preserve his own image of himself, i.e. his dignity, may be illustrated in his arguments with the other characters around him. They include his argument with Howard that he can still sell, his arguments with Charley over the card game and the job and his argument with his own son Biff about not being a "dime a dozen" i.e. worthless. "I am not a dime a dozen", says he, "I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman" (1986: 132). All these examples show that Willy is eager to take action rather to remain passive in front of what challenges the 'image of his rightful status'.

Behind Willy's continuous struggle to keep his personal dignity, Miller probes the essence of the American Dream and depicts the shortcoming of the capitalistic society during the years of depression. In fact, Willy drifts in and out of a dream. In spite of his old age, the ideals of success in business and respectability in society still stir his emotions and hearken his passions. Through all the play, his credo remains "someday I'll have my own business, and I'll never have to leave home anymore (...) bigger than uncle Charley! Because Charley is not liked – He's liked but he's not well liked" (ibid. 30).

In *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman stands more like the scapegoat of the capitalist society and the bitter illusions of the American dream than the victim of any of his personal shortcomings. Like all tragic heroes, he remains faithful to his vision, and his 'struggle upward' remains firmly established in his character and hopes. And if he has chosen to commit suicide, it is not because he has failed to accommodate the new order and has given up his efforts at social enhancement. He himself refutes this alternative when he says: "you can't eat the orange and throw away the peel! A man is not a piece of fruit" ( ibid. 82). Instead, Willy has consciously chosen to invest his last asset, i.e. his life, for the price of the insurance money. His ultimate vision is that the hopes he placed in the American dream were misguided, and that his dream of success can be achieved only through and after death.

*The Crucible* (1953) is another play that sustains analysis with Miller's idea of the tragic. It is an allegory that re-writes the Salem Witch Hunt of 1692. Its plot is articulated around questions of politics, land ownership, power struggles, and personal vengeance. It describes the tumult wrought upon early Salem when the village was overtaken by accusations of witchcraft. At the end of the story, many persons are convicted and unjustly sentenced to death. Among these convicts, there is John Proctor who has been unrightfully involved by a young girl who managed to take revenge against his wife Elizabeth.

John Proctor seems the main character of *The Crucible*. Arthur Miller describes him as an "even tempered" and a "not easily led" individual, who does not support any faction in the town. He alludes to his modest status when he writes that Proctor "is a sinner, not only against the moral fashion of the time, but against his own vision of decent conduct" (P. 27). Decoded through Miller's standards of heroism, this statement informs us that Proctor does not belong to Salem's clerical institution, and that he is not an exceptionally virtuous character, nor even a famous landowner.

If Proctor seems to be the hero of *The Crucible*, it is because he makes a clear stand against the court, and because he is the character that shows the strongest opposition to the established order\*. In addition, among all the other characters of the play, he is the one that struggles the most fiercely to retain his dignity. Bravery is thus a trait of character that suits him well. For instance, he confesses honestly to his wife his flirtations with Abigail and asks her forgiveness. He also self-denounces his love affair to the court in order to spare his wife's life. Proctor exhibits dignity even when he signs the false confession of witchcraft. After he knew that Judge Danforth will post it on the church door and will use him as an example to get other people confess, Proctor tears the paper into pieces and shouts : “ Because I cannot have another life! Because I lie and sign my self to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang ! How may I live without my name ?

Proctor's tragic fate may be read against the backdrop intricacies of the plot. But a close reading of *The Crucible* reveals that the play is an allegory whose main issue is tightly linked to the McCarthy Hearings between 1950 and 1954. At that time, many American intellectuals suspected of sympathy for communism, just as those characters suspected of witchcraft in the play, were arrested, interviewed, and blacklisted. As a consequence, a mass hysteria and a mindless persecution swept the United States of America and brought the individual liberties to a severe test.

The witch-hunt mechanisation of *The Crucible* allows Miller to make a covert but intelligent stand against the insanity of the McCarthy Hearings. The intolerance of Salem's clergy and Judge Danforth's inquisitive procedures are the means through which he warns against the paranoia and the superstition that may result out of a group's desire to make all the people conform to their own code of behaviour. Behind Proctor's stoic resistance and his tragic end, Miller also makes a high claim for the American “founding principles”, such as the freedom of speech and the freedom of worship, and reminds that history repeats itself, and that if people would not take care, America would again fall in the same havoc that was wrought upon early Salem.

As a conclusion to our discussion of Miller's plays and our comparative study between the Greek and the modern tragedies, as embodied respectively in the theories of Aristotle and Arthur Miller, we can say that before all tragedy is a quest for literary form. And whatever form it may take, it arouses aesthetic pleasure on condition it remain faithful to the values of the community it represents. Accordingly, Miller can be said to be successful in his departure from Aristotelian conception of tragedy, because he has adapted his literary medium both to America's social reality and to its literary tradition. He has thus drawn the portrait of his main characters in the same lineage with their literary ancestors, such as Huck Finn, Jay Gatsby, and the popular heroes of Horatio Alger's fictions, and has made a high claim for the thematic issue in order to align his plays with the didactic propensity inherent in the American fiction.

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